

“Transformation”

Sermon on Mark 7:1-13

The Bishop wants us to talk about “change,” but we church folk have a lot of trouble with “change.” Yet, if you look around you see the evidence for the need for change mounting. The United Methodist Church, as well as Christianity itself, here in America is rapidly declining at rates that will force a massive transformation of what the “Church” will look like in the 21st Century. So, let’s talk about “change” for a moment.

The latest trend or fad among the preaching riff raff is visual imagery. Now a days to really be a great preacher one must use visual aids, computer screens, and movies to highlight sermon points so before we get into sermonizing I would like to share with all of you some visual aids. But since I could not afford the copyright fees to show a movie nor the expensive projector and screen I just brought along some monkeys.

A person could learn a lot from a monkey. Consider the following psychological experiment done with monkeys. Start with a cage containing five monkeys. Inside the cage hang one delicious yellow banana by a string just out of their reach. Now, place a ladder or set of stairs beneath the banana so that the monkeys have a way to get to said banana. Funny thing about monkeys, they go absolutely ape over bananas. Before long one of the five monkeys will try to go for the banana by climbing the stairs or ladder, and when that monkey hits the first step or ladder rung spray all the monkeys thoroughly with cold water from a garden hose. After a while another monkey will attempt to see if he can get to the banana, and when that monkey tries it again, spray all the monkeys with cold water. Keep spraying the water every time a monkey goes for the banana.

Pretty soon when any monkey tries to go for the banana the other monkeys will try to prevent him from doing so, as a matter of fact, they will viciously attack any monkey that goes for the banana. Now, put away the garden hose and the cold water and remove one of the five monkeys and replace him with a new monkey. Now, new monkey, since he is new to the block, doesn’t know how things work around here so when he sees the banana he simply heads for the stairs to grab the banana. Much to this monkey’s surprise and horror however, the four original monkeys viciously attack him when he touches the stairs, and after a few more attempts new monkey learns that if he tries to climb the stairs he will be attacked, so he is left to sit there and wonder why he cant have the banana.

Next, remove another one of the original five monkeys and replace him with a new monkey. This newcomer goes straight for the stairs that lead to said banana, but this newcomer is also viciously attacked by the original monkeys, but strangely enough the previous new monkey also attacks this newcomer with enthusiasm! Likewise, replace a third original monkey with a new one, then a fourth, then a fifth and lo and behold every time the newest monkey heads for the stairs he is viciously attacked.

This is the funny part, the monkeys that are now beating the newcomer have absolutely no idea why they are not permitted to climb the stairs or even why they are attacking the latest newcomer for trying. We have replaced all of the original five who were sprayed by water for touching the stairs, and these new ones have never been sprayed for touching the stairs, nevertheless, no monkey will ever again approach the stairs to try for the banana. Why not?

Because as far as these monkeys know – get this – *that’s the way it’s always been done around here!* And that my friends is how too many of our churches operate.

How many of us can relate to that newest monkey? We either join a new church or take up a new church job and we dare suggest that maybe the church try something different – like moving the sacred coffee pot from where great uncle Jim Bob placed it forty years ago to a more practical location where everyone can reach it – and suddenly we are viciously attacked by the monkeys that have been around a bit longer than we have. Ever felt like that? Or maybe – let’s be honest – have we ever acted like those other monkeys by viciously attacking someone because they tried to do something new in the church?

I’ll go first in the honesty game. When I was a wee lad of ten or eleven the little church I attended got a new preacher. I say “new” because our “old” one was really, really old – black suit, white hair, ancient of days, type of old. Well, this “new” preacher rode up on his “Harley” sporting a beard and a “Hawaiian flowerdy” shirt. He did things differently. I remember the his first “first Sunday of the month.” The only thing I have ever known concerning Holy Communion was saltine crackers and those little shot glasses. I couldn’t believe that first “first Sunday” when this upstart, whipper-snapper of a preacher made us break off a piece of the bread from a real loaf of bread and we all had to drink from a single cup! I was so mad about this change that when it came my turn I hauled off and kicked this upstart in his chins!

Jesus has a great deal to say about his disciples – us -- acting like a bunch of monkeys in the church. Look at **Mark 7:1-13**. Ouch! For those of us behaving like monkeys by attacking others for not doing things the way we have always done them in the church Jesus’ words sting. The Pharisees and the Elders have accumulated a lot of tradition that Jesus says has nothing to do with the Word of God, and they walk around town condemning anyone who does not hold to these traditions as if they had violated God’s sacred Word.

There is an old joke that is continually making the rounds. A young woman, recently married, wishes to bake a ham for her new husband. She calls up dear old mom seeking the old family recipe and dear old mom gladly gives it to her, and then adds, *“But be sure and cut both ends off of the ham before you bake it.”* The young woman is a bit puzzled and asks why and dear old mom replies, *“Because that’s the way my mom did it.”* Well, the daughter, not satisfied with mom’s answer decides to hop in the car and drive over to the nursing home to ask grandma why one must cut the two ends off the ham before baking it. Grandma however, is in the middle of a hot and heavy bingo tournament and simply mutters to her granddaughter, *“That’s the way my mom always did it.”* Still not satisfied, the young woman decides to ask her great-grandmother why the two ends of the ham must be cut off before baking it. Unfortunately great-grandma is busily packing for her trip to Tunica to once again try her luck at the craps table, and as she slides behind the wheel of her pink Cadillac, and as she squalls the tires heading off down the road, she yells back to her great-granddaughter, *“Because dear, the stupid ham wouldn’t fit in my old baking dish.”*

Ever feel like many of the things we do in the church is like cutting the two ends off a ham. It serves absolutely no purpose and it is absolutely dumb and crazy to do it, but people insist we do it because why? --- *That’s the way it’s always been done around here!*

Think about this one, in my last appointment I served two churches. The smaller one required me driving out to the backwoods, and every Sunday I drove out to Buena

Vista. Now to get there one had to cross the railroad tracks. Funny things go through one's mind – especially mine – and I began to wonder why the distance – or gauge – between the two rails is exactly 4 feet & 8.5 inches. Why such an odd number? Why not five feet? Well, one pokes around for the answer and we are told, “*because that's the way the English build railroads and English immigrants built our railroads.*” So, why did the English build them like that? Because that is the same distance between the old English wagon wheels and the people who made the wagons used the same pattern and design of the wagon to build the train cars. Okay! So why did the wagons have that peculiar odd wheel spacing? Because that was the same distance between the ruts in the old Roman roads that ran through England. Why do these ruts have such an unusual distance between them? Well, you see, Roman war chariots formed those initial ruts, which everyone else had to match for fear of destroying their wagon wheels, and these chariots were built according to the same specifications all over the empire. By now we are probably wondering what horse's rear in the Roman Empire came up with such an odd spacing? Well get this, the Roman chariot was built just wide enough to accommodate the back ends of two horses – four feet, 8.5 inches.

But here is the funny part, when we see a space shuttle on the launching pad there are two big boosters attached to the sides of the main fuel tank. These are solid rocket boosters and the people who designed and built them really wanted to make them much larger but they couldn't. Do we want to know why? Because these rockets had to be shipped by railroad and the railroad from the west coast to the Florida must pass through a tunnel in the Rocky Mountains and these rockets had to fit through that tunnel and the tunnel is not that much wider than the railroad track, which we now know is about as wide as two horses' behinds. So, a major feature of what is the world's most advanced transportation system was hindered in its development by some horse's ass two thousand years ago.

Do we know any horses' asses that are running our churches? Are we one of them? Are we continually insisting over and over that we keep doing the same thing over and over because that is the way we have always done it? Well, that isn't a good reason to keep doing it, and as a matter of fact that is the Pharisee's way of doing things, and it doesn't work. If we are going to make disciples for Jesus Christ and reach out to a new generation then we better pull ourselves out of the eighteenth century where most of our churches are still stuck, and we better quit acting like a bunch of monkeys or horses' asses insisting that the two ends of the proverbial ham must be cut off because that's the way we have always done it.

The Bishop says we are about to confront the winds of change; I believe we are facing a hurricane of change that will be unlike anything the Church has ever seen. About every 500 years Christianity undergoes paradigm shifts were the world before and after are so fundamentally different that people wonder how it could have ever been before. First it was Jesus Christ, then the rise of Christendom under the Emperor Constantine when Christianity became the official religion of the Empire, then it was the East and West split creating the Roman Catholic and Orthodox worlds around the year 1000, and finally it was Martin Luther and the rise of Protestantism in the 1500s – well friends if history holds to this pattern we are reaching the days when another sea change will transform the Christian world. My grandmother was born in 1900 and died in the year 2000; she was born in the days of covered wagons and died in the age of spaceflight

and the Internet. I was told by an expert that the change and transformation she witnessed in her lifetime will be nothing compared to the change we are about to witness in the next 20 years – the transformation awaiting us will be 20 times greater, and yet the Church is still struggling to enter the 20th Century let alone the 21st. I heard the United Methodist Bishop in Russia remark, “You pride yourself on ‘Contemporary Worship’ which is really music and style that is 40 years old, and you struggle against a ‘Traditional Worship’ that is really only 60 years old, how are you possibly going to understand today’s world?”

The ground is shifting beneath our feet, and we can either be swept along with history or swept underneath it. I believe that the Christianity of Methodism and John Wesley will speak powerfully to the new world that is emerging if we would just set it free from the shackles of mindless and unimaginative tradition.

How do we witness to this brave new world that is emerging? How do we be the Church in the 21st Century? How do we redefine what we do and what we believe? What do we set aside and what do we proudly carry forward? What needs to change and what must change? These are questions that are not going to be answered by a committee or a group of pastors; these are questions that are going to be answered when we join together and discern the movement of the Holy Spirit in our imaginations, our dreams, and our hopes for the future. Will you join your hearts with mine and let us dream dreams, capturing that vision of the Church God is preparing just beyond the horizon?

Funny thing the bible, it ends with these words, “*And (GOD) who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’*”